DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 482 920 UD 035 978

AUTHOR	Fry, Richard
TITLE	High School Dropout Rates for Latino Youth. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY	Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-UD-03-12
ISSN	ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE	2003-11-00
NOTE	4p.; Number 193.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0035
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll Free); Tel: 212-678-3433; Fax: 212-678-4012; e-mail: eric-cue@columbia.edu. For full text: http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/pubget.asp?show=1.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; *Dropout Rate; *Dropouts; Educational Research; *Hispanic American Students; Immigrants; Secondary Education; Student Mobility
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; General Educational Development Tests

ABSTRACT

Dropout rates are particularly problematic measures for Hispanic youth. One-third of Hispanic adolescents are foreign-born. Their sending countries tend to have much lower rates of secondary school completion than does the United States. This digest presents recent tabulations on the number of Latino high school dropouts, noting pitfalls in interpreting the statistics. It also examines the outcomes of Hispanic youth in U.S. schools by generation and the success of dropouts in ultimately finishing high school. U.S. Department of Education data clearly underline the disadvantages that Latino youth have, on average, upon entry into adulthood. The Hispanic dropout rate fell from 21.8 percent in 1990 to 21.1 percent in 2000, (three times greater than the 2000 non-Hispanic white dropout rate). The aggregate Hispanic high school dropout rate is a poor indicator of secondary school performance. Distinguishing between those who have never been exposed to U.S. schools and those who have is critical for the prospects and design of appropriate interventions. Hispanic immigrants educated in the United States have no worse educational outcomes than native-born Hispanics. Third generation Hispanics perform no better than their second generation peers. Among Hispanics who do not graduate from high school, about 40 percent obtain a GED certificate(Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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ED 482 920

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Richard Fry

December 2003
EDO-UD-03-12
ISSN-0889-8049

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

UD 035 978

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DIGEST

Number 193, December 2003 EDO-UD-03-12 ISSN 0889 8049

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES FOR LATINO YOUTH

The high school dropout rate is a long-standing, widely used indicator of youth educational outcomes. Teens that have dropped out of school clearly face an array of disadvantages. They are paid significantly less in the labor market and their employment opportunities are diminished. Their opportunities to enter postsecondary education are severely curtailed. Dropout status is also associated with numerous socially debilitating behaviors, including illegal activity, teen fertility, and idleness (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Dropout rates are also frequently used to benchmark school system performance. They are one of the few secondary school indicators published for every state and, unlike educational achievement measures, the public widely understands and accepts the norm that the statistics are attempting to capture.

Dropout rates are particularly problematic measures for Latino youth. One third of Hispanic adolescents are foreign-born. Their sending countries tend to have much lower rates of secondary school completion than the U.S. Dropout statistics are not transparent for mobile adolescent populations. This digest presents the most recent tabulations on the number of Latino high school dropouts and the pitfalls in interpreting the statistics. The outcomes of Hispanic youth in U.S. schools by generation are examined as well as the success of dropouts in ultimately finishing a high school education.

Level and Trends in the Hispanic High School Dropout Rate

The U.S. Department of Education publishes several high school dropout rate statistics based on household surveys (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). The prominent measure is the "status dropout rate" or the fraction of youth that have not completed high school and are not enrolled in school at the interview date. Finely grained status dropout rates can be tallied from the Decennial Census since it is a household census rather than a survey. In 2000, about 530,000 Hispanic 16-to-19-year-olds were high school dropouts, yielding a dropout rate of 21.1 percent for all Hispanic 16-to-19-year-olds (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). The Latino youth dropout rate was more than three times greater than the 2000 non-Hispanic "white alone" dropout rate of 6.9 percent. As a measure of the future schooling and social and economic prospects among teen populations, these aggregate status dropout rates clearly underline the disadvantages that Latino youth have, on average, upon entry to adulthood.

Contrary to U.S. Department of Education analyses based on household surveys (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), the Census tallies clearly show that the U.S. status high school dropout rate significantly fell during the 1990s. The number and percent of 16-to-19-year-olds that were dropouts declined. With the exception of the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander race group, all major racial/ethnic groups experienced a significant decline in the dropout rate (albeit racial trends are difficult to measure due to the change in the Census racial categories). The Hispanic dropout rate fell from 21.8 percent in 1990 to 21.1 percent in 2000.

The Hispanic High School Dropout Rate as an Indicator of School Performance

The aggregate Hispanic high school dropout rate is a poor indicator of U.S. secondary school performance. Many of the 530,000 Hispanic high school dropouts are recently arrived immigrants who have never been enrolled in U.S. schools (Fry, 2003; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996; National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). They meet the status dropout definition, but that does not imply that they necessarily dropped out of U.S. secondary schools. Using 2000 Census survey data, it is estimated that about 175,000 of the 530,000 Hispanic high school dropouts were likely never enrolled in U.S. schools (Fry, 2003). Although it is difficult to obtain a precise estimate of the number and characteristics of Latino teens that have been enrolled in U.S. schools using Census data, the status dropout rate for Hispanic 16-to-19 year-olds that have been enrolled in U.S. schools is about 15 percent (Fry, 2003). This is about twice, rather than three times, the non-Hispanic white dropout rate.

Distinguishing between Latino youth that have never been exposed to U.S. schools and those that have been in U.S. classrooms is also critical for the prospects and design of appropriate interventions. Hispanic teen dropouts that have never been in U.S. schools have markedly different language, gender, family, and labor market characteristics from Latino teen dropouts that are U.S. educated. For example, the vast majority of dropouts that have never been in U.S. schools have very limited spoken English abilities. Most Hispanic dropouts educated in the U.S. have English fluency by age 16 (Fry, 2003).

The Prevalence of Dropping Out among U.S. Educated Hispanic Generations

The relative magnitude of dropping out among U.S. school children is confirmed by national longitudinal studies of secondary school cohorts. In the most recent cohort study, the National Educational Longitudinal Study tracking 1988 eighth graders, 14.3 percent of Latino youth had dropped out as of 1994, compared to 5.7 percent of non-Hispanic white youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

Surprisingly, Hispanic immigrant youth that are educated in U.S. schools seem to have no worse educational outcomes than native-born Hispanic youth. In fact, there appear to be no generational differences in the basic measures of secondary school performance among U.S. educated Hispanic youth. Regardless of how dropping out is defined, first, second, and third and higher generation Hispanic youth drop out of school at similar rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998; Driscoll, 1999). Similarly, the grades and test scores of Hispanic teens educated

in U.S. schools are comparable across generations (Kao, 1999). It is critical to recognize that these generational results only apply to Hispanic teens educated in U.S. schools. Immigrant Hispanic youth that are entirely educated abroad have markedly worse educational outcomes than their U.S. educated peers (Fry & Lowell, 2002; Chiswick & DebBurman, 2003). In addition, the lack of generational differences may only apply to secondary school outcomes. New evidence from the NELS reveals that third generation Hispanic youth are significantly less likely to finish college (Driscoll, forthcoming).

That immigrant Hispanic youth perform as well as native-born Hispanic youth in U.S. schools is rather remarkable. Immigrant children have lower English proficiency, family income, parental education and home resources. Immigrant youth of Mexican origin demonstrate extremely low self-efficacy, self-concept, and high measured alienation from their peers. Nonetheless, immigrant youth that arrive early in childhood seem to be able to academically surmount these disadvantages (Fry, 2003).

That third generation Latino youth perform not significantly better than their second generation Latino peers is very disconcerting. Since they have U.S. born parents, a much larger share of their parents have finished high school and accordingly have higher incomes. Yet these parental advantages do not seem to result in significantly better school performance. Today's Latino students, regardless of how long their ancestors have been in the U.S., are on average markedly less likely to graduate high school on time in comparison to white students.

The inferences that one can draw from the similarity in high dropout rates across generations of Hispanic students are important but circumscribed. All Hispanic U.S. educated students dropout at higher rates than white students and thus it is likely that for the foreseeable future Latino adult educational attainment will trail white educational attainment. The lack of generational improvement does not imply that the grandchildren of today's immigrant youth will necessarily dropout of school at the same rates as today's immigrants. It is simply difficult to surmise how well the grandchildren of today's immigrants will fare in U.S. schools.

Second Chance Alternatives: Latino High School Completion by Age 30

A high school dropout rate of 15 percent does not imply that 85 percent of youth will finish high school. The high school completion rate could be either higher or lower than 85 percent. Some currently enrolled youth (who presently are not dropouts) will not finish high school. And some present dropouts will subsequently finish high school either by graduation or receiving a General Educational Development (GED) certificate.

The GED has become an increasingly important path by which youth complete high school. The likelihood of completion via GED does not seem especially high. Among Latino youth that did not graduate high school with a diploma, about 40 percent completed high school by obtaining a GED certificate (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, forthcoming). This is below the white rate, which indicates that about half of white youth who did not graduate high school finish by obtaining their GED.

It is not precisely clear how many Latino youth finish high school by age 30. The NELS suggests that 86 percent of Latino youth educated in U.S. schools finish high school by age 25 or 26 (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, forthcoming). Tabulations using Census data indicate that 80 percent of native-born Latino youth finish high school by age 25 to 29 (Vernez & Mizell, 2002). High school dropout rates are just one facet of a complex evaluation of educational outcomes for Latino youth in U.S. public schools. Latino dropout rates suggest that U.S. schools, on average, have improved their performance in assisting Latino youth to stay in school and graduate. The native-born Latino high school dropout rate among 16- to-19-year-olds fell during the 1990s. These are youths who presumably spent their academic careers in U.S. schools. Nonetheless, significantly fewer Latino youth finish high school compared to white youth.

—Richard Fry
Pew Hispanic Center

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This digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (800) 601-4868. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Inés Sucre, Managing Editor.

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